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Removing Helms From the CIA Had to Be a 'Personal' Decision

THIS CITY'S BEST wisecracker proposed last summer to Soviet Ambassador Anatoliy Dobrynin that he make himself available as a replacement for Sen. Thomas Eagleton on the Democratic ticket. "Mr. Dobrynin," he said in mock seriousness, "you would not be fooled by briefings from the Defense Department about the strength of U.S. weapons. You would know."

I would not argue—even in the same vein—that Richard Helms, whom Mr. Nixon recently deposed as director of the Central Intelligence Agency, knows more about Soviet weapons than leaders in the Kremlin. But it is a demonstrable fact that he knows more about them than the Defense Department does. Helms was right, a couple of years ago, when the question of whether or not to build an ABM system was being argued in the Senate—and Melvin Laird, and his research chief, John Foster, were wrong.

Laird told the President that the Soviets were going for a first-strike capability with the development of the huge SS-9s. He predicted they would build them at the rate of 50 or 60 a year. By 1974, he suggested, the Soviet Union, possessed of 500 SS-9s, would be ready to call the tune.

IT WAS A FRIGHTENING prediction but it happened—perhaps by coincidence—to come at the time when President Nixon was trying to convince the U.S. Senate to embark upon an ABM system. Laird's predictions fitted neatly with the arguments Mr. Nixon's men were making on Capitol Hill. No doubt, the President was pleased to have them.

In this context, the word from Helms cannot have been pleasing. Helms said the Soviet Union was not going for a first strike; it would not build SS-9s at the rate of 50 or 60 per year; it would not reach the level of 500.

As it turned out, Helms was right and Laird and Foster were wrong. The Soviet Union built 34 more SS-9s and then stopped at 318; the balance of terror preserves the peace; nothing suggests that it can be disrupted by 1974.

I HAVE SINCE thought that Helms displayed courage in sticking to his view in the face of formidable opposition and his superior's obvious predilection for it. So I was disturbed when I learned Helms was to be dismissed as

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chief of CIA and more disturbed when I consider the possible reasons for his dismissal.

Perhaps an admission for the record should be entered at this point: I served for some years as an associate of Helms' in the agency. I learned to respect his quiet pragmatism, to admire his ability and his human decency and to stand in absolute awe of his uncanny ability to avoid having anything to do with those programs of the era which in retrospect should clearly have been handled by the army, the navy or Ringling Brothers Circus.

Nevertheless, I find myself hoping that Mr. Nixon doesn't like Helms at all. For it is easier to live with this thought than with the suspicion that Mr. Nixon doesn't like the intelligence which Helms has been giving him. Consider, for example, the following:

- That thousands of North Vietnamese agents hold jobs in the South Vietnamese government.
- That the Cambodian invasion will not halt infiltration.
- That the enemy headquarters or COSVN is not where the Department of Defense thinks it is.
- That the South Vietnamese army will not perform well in Laos.
- That the bombing will not cause North Vietnam to sue for peace.
- That mining Haiphong Harbor will not cut off supplies.

These cannot have been welcome views at the White House. But the important thing is that they were accurate views. So I hope the decision to dismiss Helms was not ideological. The CIA is one of the places in government which ought not to be asked to come up with something better.

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